Living in Truth in the Age of Automatization

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LIVING IN TRUTH IN THE AGE OF AUTOMATIZATION

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"Living in Truth in the Age of Automatization" by Jordan Jenkins, Advised by Dr. Gerald Easter

"Living in Truth in the Age of Automatization" is a discussion of dehumanization in the period of technological and bureaucratic supremacy. The article uses the writings of former Czech president Václav Havel and American novelist Kurt Vonnegut to argue that neither the automatization inherent within the Eastern Communist Model nor the mass consumer culture of the Western Capitalist Model are ideal, and to discuss the possibility of a third way, a way called "living in truth" which protects human dignity and the right of every man to pursue meaningful work in a society.

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Chapter 1: Two Men with Similar Conclusions

I am convinced that what is called 'dissent' in the Soviet bloc is a specific modern experience, the experience of life at the very ramparts of dehumanized power.

~Václav Havel, *Politics and Conscience*[1]

The twentieth century dragged humanity through two devastating world wars, a rapid boom of technological advancement, and a drawn out ideological struggle between two major powers. Across the globe, progress manifested itself in a number of variant forms. Airplanes, highways, refrigeration, television, and more entered the conversation, carried alongside nuclear technologies, computers, and fiber optics. The eastern half of Europe fell behind a thick iron curtain, trudging out its own collectivist progress, while Western Europe and the United States enjoyed the benefits of these new technologies, and continued on its path of development into a mass consumer culture.

During this era two men were living and working on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. One man was surviving under the Soviet rule of the Eastern European Communist bloc, the other lived in mid-eastern industrial America. Neither man would finish college, but both would become writers who would speak out about the major socioeconomic problems of their respective social

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[1] Havel, Vaclav. "Politics and Conscience" in *Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 155.

climates, and come to their own conclusions about the world which were eerily similar to one another.

The first man was Václav Havel, a playwright, member of the Czech dissidence movement of the 1970s, reluctant leader of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, last president of Czechoslovakia and, after the breakup of Czech and Slovakia, the first president of the newly formed Czech Republic. Before his stint in politics, he had spent many years in prison as punishment for his dissidence, but throughout these difficult times he wrote dozens of essays and plays which strongly criticized the dehumanizing ideology of the Soviet regime, and drew attention to the effects of mass consumerism in the West. He advocated above all else the value of human individuality and expression, and argued that the proper society would be one that returned the "human element" into the mixture.

The second man, the American, was Indiana-born Kurt Vonnegut. He was a veteran of World War II, winner of the purple heart, and former POW and survivor of the terrible 1945 bombing of Dresden - an experience which would haunt him throughout his life, and inspire him to write many works against war and excessive violence, most notably, *Slaughterhouse Five.* Because one of the prevalent themes of Vonnegut's work was the significance of preserving human dignity, many of them were translated and published in Czechoslovakia while that nation was still under totalitarian rule. In 1985, Petr Oslzly, a man who would later become an advisor to Havel, produced a play in Prague based on Vonnegut's

novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, a performance for which Vonnegut had been present.[2]

Despite his wide readership, Vonnegut has been criticized many times for not being a "serious writer," a critique which has followed him around since he published his first novel *Player Piano*, a dystopia of automation, in 1952.[3] By his own design, Kurt Vonnegut never wished to be labeled as a science fiction writer. "I became a so-called science fiction writer when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer." He explains. "I decided that it was because I wrote about technology, and most fine American writers know nothing about technology.[4]" The truth was, Vonnegut's works can be more appropriately labeled as satire, as the subjects of his novels and essays deal almost entirely with cultural and political issues which existed during the time of the writing.

Player Piano, widely acclaimed as science fiction, was about a real place - Schenectady, New York. In on of his later works, Vonnegut discusses this wide misinterpretation, "There are huge factories in Schenectady and nothing else. I and my associates were engineers, physicists, chemists, and mathematicians.[5]" The work which focuses its attention on the mass dehumanization caused by the replacement of man by machines, was a realistic interpretation of one of the prevailing fears of the 1950s. "When I wrote about the General Electric Company

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[2] Richter, Jan. Radio Prague Presents: *Come with Me to Prague - Kurt Vonnegut and the Czech Underground.* Produced 4/19/2007. On-line at http://www.radio.cz/en/section/panorama/come-with-me-to-prague-kurt-vonnegut-and-the-czech-underground. Accessed on 3/1/2013.

[3] *Player Piano* was originally published as *Utopia 14.*

[4] Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without a Country.* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005: 16.

[5] Ibid.

and Schenectady, it seemed a fantasy of the future to critics who had never seen the place.[6]" People who hadn't lived there or visited there, assumed it was a work of science fiction not grounded in reality. Yet, the evidence of systemic dehumanization was as real in Schenectady as it was in Communist-ruled Prague - it just had taken different forms.

Dehumanization occurs when a bureaucratic or governing body, whether political or otherwise, decides to strip a group of people of its right to life, common dignity, or the ability to pursue meaningful work. The quickest way for this to occur is when men are reduced to mere cogs in a bureaucratic or corporate machine, when they are told what to think and do and how to think and do it, with little allowance for their individual opinions about or possible contributions to that society. Men, in these circumstances, learn to perform actions not out of will or conscious choice, but from rote automatism, an automatism born from the continual fear of coercion or loss of livelihood. Automatization takes over when man becomes conditioned by the structure of the region in which he lives, and thus acts accordingly. Dehumanization effectively turns man into a machine, doing things because he must, and not from any deeper cause.

Antonio Gramsci, an early twentieth century Italian thinker, supports Havel and Vonnegut's claims. He declared, "We must not forget that behind the worker there is still a man there, and we should not remove from him the possibility of broadening the horizons of his spirit, just so that we can enslave him right away;

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[6] Ibid.

make him a machine.[7]" He asserted that men should work to benefit the whole of society, as opposed to being enslaved to a ruling class that had a monopoly over the means of production. Gramsci, like Havel, was imprisoned for his stance against dehumanization.

The bent towards automatization is not necessarily attached to any type of government, but can thrive in both communist and capitalist societies in varying degrees. In the West, for example, this mechanizing arm has more of an impact on the non-owners of the means of production, who are forced to sell their labor-power to survive. In communist economies, on the other hand, everyone is affected. Vonnegut and Havel realized the commonality of these issues, and sought to influence a third way, one that wasn't part of the mass consumer society of the West nor of the collectivist ideology of the East, but instead one that promoted human dignity regardless of status or tax bracket.

This third way is something Václav Havel referred to as "living within the truth." This is essentially "serving truth consistently, purposefully, and articulately, and organizing this service.[8]" Furthermore, it also includes, "everything from self education and thinking about the world, through free creative activity and its communication to others, to the most varied free, civic attitudes, including instances of independent social self-organization.[9]" It's a cognitive appreciation

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[7] Gramsci, Antonio. "Men or Machines?" Trans. by Natalie Cambell. *Avant!* December 24, 1916. Found on-line at http://www.classicistranieri.com/antonio-gramsci-uomini-o-macchine.html. Accessed 4/1/2013.

[8] Havel, Vaclav. "The Power of the Powerless" from *Living in Truth.* London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 87.

[9] Ibid.

for the role of the individual in society, and an attention to how this person can contribute to that society in a meaningful way.

To live in truth is to embrace the notion of human responsibility. Havel quotes Dostoevsky when he says: "All are responsible for all," claiming that each man should be held accountable for the prevalent state of the world. This is especially true for leaders, those who are officially capable of promoting or crushing the ideas of freedom. According to Havel, individual actors do have the power to change history, and therefore are held responsible when tyranny overrides freedom, and falsities drive out the ability to live in truth.

Additionally, one of the greatest evils, Havel is saying, is not just that individual freedoms are being suppressed, but that they are being suppressed everywhere. "No error could be greater than the one looming largest," he begins, "that of a failure to understand the totalitarian systems for what they ultimately are - a convex mirror of all modern civilization.[10]" He proclaims the totalitarian system as a "warning" to the West, a harbinger of their future if they do not reverse their "eschatology of the impersonal," and begin to place the needs of its citizenry above the desire for profit, production, and "progress."[11]

Kurt Vonnegut, equally aware of this global commonality, aimed to promote the value of human individuality and purpose in his essays, novels, and speeches. In a popular speech in 1996, he proposed two new Amendments to the U.S. Constitution: (1) Every newborn shall be sincerely welcomed and cared

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[10] Havel, Vaclav. "Politics and Conscience" from *Living in Truth.* London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 145.

[11] Ibid, 146.

for until maturity, and (2) Every adult who needs it shall be given meaningful work to do, at a living wage.[12] To many people this may sound strangely like socialism, but Vonnegut didn't make that distinction. He called it the preservation of human dignity, and man's responsibility to take care of each other. He was saying, as Havel and Dostoevsky before him, "All are responsible for all."

What both men have stated in their own way is that the debate should not be about the disparities between socialism and capitalism. The truth is that neither the current incarnation of Western Liberal Democracy nor the Soviet Socialist model have the answers. Havel and Vonnegut are calling for a third way, a "post-democratic" system not defined solely by ideology, but based on the necessity of human expression and the art of living in truth.

Havel exclaims that the reduction of the problem to the "question of socialism and capitalism" gives him a sense of "emerging from the depths of the last century.[13]" This type of thinking is outdated, too simplistic, and completely misses the point. Instead of grappling the moth-eaten question of battling ideologies, these two thinkers encourage a more salient question with more universal acceptability. The question is:

> "Whether we shall, by whatever means, succeed in reconstituting the natural world as the true terrain of politics, rehabilitating the personal experience of human beings as the initial measure of things, placing morality above politics and responsibility above our desires, in making human community meaningful, in returning content to human speaking, in reconstituting, as the focus of all social action, the autonomous, integral and dignified human I, responsible for ourself because we are bound to

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[12] Vonnegut, Kurt. *Timequake*. New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1996: 176.

[13] Havel, Vaclav. "Politics and Conscience" in *Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 149.

> something higher, and capable of sacrificing something, in extreme cases even everything, of his banal, prosperous private life - that 'rule of everydayness' as Jan Patočka used to say - for the sake of that which gives life meaning.[14]

Or, in the words of Jerome Klinkowitz, in his stunning commentary on the works of Vonnegut, “The key solution to human problems, Vonnegut kept insisting, is to find human dignity for all human beings—even those who seem to least deserve it.[15]”

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[14] Ibid, 149-150.

[15] Klinkowitz, Jerome. "Vonnegut in America." Vonnegut in America. Ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler. New York, NY: Dell Co., Inc, 1977. 31.

Chapter 2: Václav Havel - Dehumanization in the Post-Totalitarian State

Karel Hvížďala: So you do have a more concrete notion of a better social system?

Václav Havel: I've already admitted to having one.

- Disturbing the Peace, 1990

Havel's critique of dehumanizing regimes - most predominately, although not limited to, the Soviet Union - is woven throughout his writings, both fiction and nonfiction. However, his words are most poignant in *Disturbing the Peace*, *Politics and Conscience*, *and The Power of the Powerless.* The latter of these works is the most popular of his publications, and it became a manifesto for dissent in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other various regions throughout Eastern Europe. In writing the *Power of the Powerless*, Havel aimed to defend the Charter 77 Movement[16], and in doing so he created a treatise on how the common man could stand against regimes bent on replacing their humanity with the system's machinery, and realize the truth in the midst of the lie.

In the work, Havel introduces a metaphor shaped like an ordinary man, the manager of a small produce store - a common greengrocer. The greengrocer is a typical citizen under the rule of the Soviet regime, a normal individual acting according to the suggested social mores of his time. He has been thrown into a

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[16] A civic initiative which criticized the government of communist Czechoslovakia for failing to implement human rights provisions in the 1960 Constitution of Czechoslovakia and other official documents, predominately *Charter 77.*

system where he has no real control over the actions of his life, and must adhere to implied notions which have trickled down from those above him. The impetus for Havel's discussion is that the greengrocer, one day, decides to place a placard in the front window of his store. The placard reads, "Workers of the World Unite!" This is a placard similar to many in store windows surrounding him, as slogans like these were a common sight in the cities throughout the Soviet Union.

Yet, despite the familiarity of these signs, the reason the man displays the placard isn't immediately transparent. Havel asks: "Why would a man such as he do a thing such as this?" Obviously the greengrocer is not a hero of the Communist regime, motivated to communicate a deeply embedded desire that the workers of the world come together as one, or promoting another similar agenda. This could not be the reason as the placard would not work towards this cause anyway. The sign by itself will not ultimately communicate anything, as all passerby who see it will inevitably ignore its content. It will be taken as a simple, inconspicuous part of the environment. It is akin to a lamp post, a street sign, or a common store front window that one sees everyday without really noticing.

So, if not for attention or communication, why does he take the time to do it? The greengrocer is not a dissident, he votes in elections as he should, attends town halls as he should. For the most part, the man stays in the "respectable" part of society, doing his daily tasks, and not drawing any notice to himself. It would seem, on the surface, that this is enough. However, and herein lies the answer to this riddle, it is not enough. In this too, the greengrocer is performing yet another task that is expected of him. Conformity in every aspect of his life is

expected of him. For the machine of the totalitarian regime to run accordingly to its design, each of the cogs must perform their various functions. The citizens under this regime must walk an extremely narrow road, they must do what is suggested without exception, or be labeled a dissident - an uncomfortable fate to all who meet it.

To Havel, the words of the sign may read "Workers of the World Unite," but they communicate something entirely different. They are declaring that a man, in this case the greengrocer, is afraid, and because of his fear he is obedient. By placing the placard he draws no attention to himself, but knows well enough that if the sign were not there, he would stand out remarkably. Therefore, in performing this action he is not acting out of will or conscious choice, but instead from rote automatism, an automatism born from the continual fear of coercion. He has been conditioned by the structure of the region in which he lives, and thus acts accordingly. In more basic terms, he performs this seemingly trivial duty for the simple reason that he must.

This reality that he knows is not something that has arisen arbitrarily, rather it has been programmed into the formula of his life, and the lives of all around him. The reason for this necessity has everything to do with the ideology existing inherently within the Communist regime. Ideology, defined by Havel, is a specious way of relating to the world. "It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them.[17]" For the greengrocer, a commitment to this ideology is an all-

[17] Havel, Vaclav. "The Power of the Powerless" *from Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 42.

encompassing element of his existence. It creates for him a purpose, a reason for action, that keeps him following the organized patterns instead of deflecting and standing against them. Essentially, it turns him into a sort of automaton, where his own sense of individualism and expression is meaningless in the amorphous movement of the system. "The complex machinery of the post-totalitarian units would be unthinkable without ideology acting as its all embracing excuse and as the excuse for each of its parts.[18]" In a way, Havel makes ideology out to be the element of fusion by which the whole machine perpetually melds together.

[1] ideology and the Post-Totalitarian system

Havel refers to the Soviet Union of the 1970s as a post-totalitarian system.[19] It is post-totalitarian in the sense that it operates much differently than the classical dictatorships of antiquity. Yet, even Havel admits that the terminology is flawed, as the post-totalitarian regime is still undoubtedly totalitarian. The predominate difference between the classical dictatorships of antiquity, and the so-called "post-totalitarian" system of the twentieth century, is a certain singularity of mind. Where some diversity of thought and action was permitted in classical dictatorships, the post-totalitarian system operates as one being, with one goal and purpose. In this system, "Individuals are reduced to little more than tiny cogs in an enormous mechanism and their significance is limited

[18] Ibid, 43.

[19] Ibid, 94.

to their function in the mechanism.[20]" This is possible only through the complete infiltration of the ideology throughout society in the post-totalitarian system. In the Hobbesian sense, it is a living, breathing Leviathan that extends its protection and capacity over all of its subjects.[21]

To speak plainly, ideology as it is such construed is a lie at its core, a basic untruth that has been so deeply ingrained into the system that many forced to buy into its dogma have either forgotten it completely or have conveniently chosen to ignore what it really is. The third category, the ones who have not forgotten and choose not to ignore it, the "dissidents," must deal with the coercive elements of the regime propagating the lie. When these dissidents are unable to accomplish their purposes, the ideology is perpetuated. In the *Power of the Powerless,* Havel argues, "The primary function of [ideology] is to provide people with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe.[22]" Yet, that is all it is, a mere illusion. This illusion exists for people like the greengrocer as a sort of guideline for behavior. Not only does

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[20] Ibid.

[21] "For by art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defense it was intended; and in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the magistrates and other officers of judicature and execution, artificial joints; reward and punishment (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty, every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) are the nerves, that do the same in the body natural; the wealth and riches of all the particular members are the strength; salus populi (the people's safety) its business; counsellors, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the memory; equity and laws, an artificial reason and will; concord, health; sedition, sickness; and civil war, death. Lastly, the pacts and covenants, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that fiat, or the Let us make man, pronounced by God in the Creation." Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan.* Introduction: 1651.

[22] Havel, Vaclav. "The Power of the Powerless" *from Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 42.

it inform them of what everyone else is doing, but demonstrates to them what they must do as well, that is, if they don't want to be excluded or alienated from society, and risk the loss of their peace or their livelihood.[23] If other individuals place signs with certain slogans, they must as well.

In the creation of the totalitarian regime, the leaders espoused a belief system and created a purpose that supposedly "filled a void." In essence, it established "aims of life" for all who were a part of it. In the integration of this way of living, many individuals were guided away from the knowledge that these "aims of life" already existed apart from the system. For Havel these true aims are plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization, and the fulfillment of individual freedom. On the other hand stand the aims of the totalitarian regime: conformity, uniformity, and discipline.[24] The difficulty remained, however, of justifying these obvious disparities so that the people would not realize what they had lost. The Soviet Union, to secure itself, had to convince its citizenry, apart from overt coercive methods, that they should give up their freedom of individual expression for the sake of system. How was this accomplished?

Havel provides the answer, it was secured through means of ideology. People had to believe that there was no other way, that the system was a vast improvement over the old way of doing things. "Ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid, 44.

aims of the system and the aims of life. It pretends that the requirements of the system derive from the requirements of life.[25]" This is the greatest trick of all. Contained within this ideology is the false belief that the system exists to serve the people, when the opposite in its totality is the truth. The system, the grand machine, exists entirely to serve itself, and it will only aid the people to the extent necessary to sustain itself; and furthermore, it doesn't distinguish between the authorities and the commonplace greengrocer. "No matter what position individuals hold in the hierarchy of power, they are not considered by the system to be worth anything in themselves, but only as things to fuel and serve this automatism.[26]" They stand solely as cogs in the machine.

In sum, the reasoning behind the integration of ideology is for dehumanization. If individuals are dehumanized, they lose their ability for expression, or perhaps more important, the capacity to exert their will over their own existence. Once they have reached this stage, they become more inclined then to do as they are instructed, without feeling the need to oppose it. For this reason as well, leaders who rise to power, rise only because they are willing to give up the right to individual will. "Part of the essence of the post-totalitarian system is that it draws everyone into its sphere of power, not so they may realize themselves as human beings, but so they may surrender their human identity in favor of the identity of the system."[27] It brings them in so that they can become

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[25] ibid.

[26] ibid.

[27] Ibid.

servants of automatism, participating in the common "responsibility," and eventually ensnared by the unit in which they find themselves.

This reality makes it extremely difficult for anyone who wishes to oppose the system to act out their dissidence. This amorphous machine, based off the energy of humans who have, at least on the surface, surrendered their individual wills on behalf of the whole, is a powerful thing. The power of the many is infinitely greater than the power of the one, and if any man desires to break up the machine from the inside, he would have to first don the mask of anonymity and conformity to ever have the opportunity to affect anything.[28] This explains why change within this system is almost impossible.

Apart from the human element, the arm that enforces the ideology of the machine of post-totalitarian system is the legal code. The legal code in this system is a framework, a unifying set of rules. "The post totalitarian system, on the other hand, is utterly obsessed with the need to bind everything in a single order: life in such a state is thoroughly permeated by a dense network of regulations, proclamations, directives, norms, orders, and rules.[29]" Naturally, like the totality of the system, the legal code is nothing more than a phantom, an excuse, actions without justification. It is an arm, not a brain. Ideology is the brain.

The legal code offers the appearance that justice has been served, that society has been protected, that the people have been taken into account. "All

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[28] Ibid, 48.

[29] Ibid, 94.

this is done to conceal the real essence of post-totalitarian legal practice: the total manipulation of society.[30]" It is the means by which the machine turns the population into automatons.

Thus Havel returns to the greengrocer, the seemingly average impersonal cog doing his duty in full view of the world. While the placard remains in the window, everything is as normal. People will pass by and notice it or not, but it won't make much of a difference. However, Havel raises a hypothetical: what would happen if one day the greengrocer decides that he doesn't want to perform this small duty any longer? What if he chooses not only to remove the sign but "snaps" entirely? What if he stops voting the way he is "supposed" to, starts saying things he shouldn't, and rediscovers the identity he had originally given up to successfully integrate into the system?

Unfortunately, because the greengrocer has no real power on his own, no real status in the machinery of the system, his actions will have immediate consequences. He will undoubtedly lose his job as manager of the shop and be transferred to a baser one with reduced pay. Other people who are following the rules of the system will persecute him as a sign of their loyalty, to propagate the same ideas which first inspired the greengrocer to set up the placard at the start. They do not feel a personal need to report him, they are merely responding to the mores inherent in the post-totalitarian regime. They are simply agents of the automatism.[31] His actions have broken the rules, although small, they have

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid, 55.

exposed the world of appearances, revealing it for what it really is, a sham. The ideology can only operate as a cohesive substance if it is applied universally, "There are no terms whatsoever on which it can coexist with living within the truth, and therefore everyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety.[32]" Thus the system, which is exists entirely to serve and perpetuate itself, will not tolerate anyone who could potentially threaten it.

The author compares the post-totalitarian system to the empire in the fable *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In the story, two weavers, men wishing to make a fool out of the ruler, persuade the Emperor to wear a certain invisible garment, telling him that anyone who cannot see it is an idiot. The Emperor, who of course cannot see it, because it is not really there, continues to wear it for fear of revealing himself as an idiot. The people, who have heard that those who cannot see it are unfit for their positions, play along with the pretense. Everybody knows that the Emperor wears no clothes, but the lie is so effective that no one dares to say a word. The lie, therefore, becomes of more use than the truth. Havel explains that the dissidents, the ones who aim to live in truth and expose the lie. They have done the unthinkable, they have admitted that the Emperor is naked.

Throughout the time of his writing, Havel was a dissident himself, a choice which led to his imprisonment in the late 1970s. As evidenced by the Prague Spring and the Charter 77 Movement, many of these civic actions attempted to flourish, and did for a short while, before being effectively repressed. In his

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[32] Ibid, 56.

words, "The post-totalitarian system is mounting a total assault on humans and humans stand against it alone, abandoned and isolated.[33]" The movements that he was part of, and eventually led, were disconnected from other such movements. People were not "living in truth," as it were, for fear of their security or in some cases their very lives, and they were choosing to give into the ruse. They were unwilling to sacrifice themselves for the cause of freedom, freedom formed as individual will and expression. They chose to remain components in the machine, perpetuating the automatism of the post-totalitarian system, not quite realizing that without these mechanical pieces, the system would collapse upon itself. As history proved, people did begin to realize, and the system could no longer sustain itself; but for many, it was too late.

[2] **Technology and the West**

Havel does not in any way limit the capacity of his experiences with the collectivist machine to Eastern Europe. On the contrary, he claims that the Western world had veered towards an automatism of its own. In the case of the post-totalitarian system, the "machine" is more political, built on a sprawling bureaucracy and single-minded allegiance to the cause the regime. In the West, it is the nature of the "technological civilization" that dehumanizes, and strips individuality of its proper significance. "The automatism of the post-totalitarian system is merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological civilization. The human failure that it mirrors is only one variant of the general

[33] Ibid, 88

failure of modern humanity."[34] It is a strain, a variation of a common problem, one faced throughout the world.

Havel admits that there are serious ideological differences between the Left and the Right, between totalitarian regimes and democratic ones. The predominate disparity is economic, and it takes the form of an endless political debate concerning the ownership of the means of production. The question is essentially whether business enterprises should be privately run or a part of the public domain.[35] Havel points out that by organizing the apparatus of a society by such general and mechanical terms, the structure creates a fundamental flaw within itself. It will continue to dehumanize its populace, whether it intended to or not. Production, as an end in itself, should not be the final goal. For Havel, the most important thing is not to lose sight of personal relationships, this includes the relationships between man and his coworkers, between subordinates and their superiors, between man and his work, and the consequences of his contribution to it.[36]

In the command economy of the post-totalitarian system, man ultimately loses his personal relationship with his work. Whatever he does won't matter in the overall schema, as he is one of thousands of moving, unthinking parts. If he were not to do his duty, he would be demoted, and then replaced. In this system he is not special, nor does he attach any true meaning to his work. He strives because he must, if he wants to eat or preserve his life. Apart from that, however,

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[34] Ibid, 115.

[35] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 13.

[36] Ibid.

it is of no real interest to him. "A worker's activity is dissipated in the anonymous, automatic functioning of the system, for which no one is responsible and which no understands.[37]" He does the work because he has no choice, not as a result of some greater sense of duty. All of that has been minimized to daily drudgery, of acting automatically, and in a way semiconsciously.

There is a portion of capitalism which holds to the truth which Havel espouses, that of growth through individual interaction, and real human relationships. The part which fosters economic motives such as enterprise, human invention, just payment, market relations, competition, etc.[38] However, Havel argues that capitalism as a whole does not earnestly promote these attitudes, nor protect the sacredness of humanity, or the good a person can perform individually within a society. He claims that capitalist economies, although in a different way, struggles with the same problems as does the post-totalitarian command economy. In *Disturbing the Peace*, he declares, "It is well known that enormous private multinational corporations are curiously like socialist states.[39]" The evidence he gives for this is the pervasive depersonalizing effects inherent within industrialization, centralization, specialization, monopolization, automation, and computerization.[40] Although the economies of these two regimes are very different, their systemic notions remain the same, proven by the effect they have on the people living under their influence.

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid 14.

[40] Ibid.

Havel uses the example of the multinational corporation IBM, comparing it to the Škoda plant.[41] He claims that IBM, although established in a capitalist country, namely, the United States, is no better than its counterpart in Communist Eastern Europe. It may be true that IBM operates on a higher efficiency scale than the Škoda plant, but, yet, both companies have lost touch with their human dimension. The men and women who work in these warehouses have effectively been turned into "a little cog in their machinery.[42]" These individuals are separated from the purposes of the technology they are producing, and, even a step further, what the impact of its product will be on the world. "They have no say in whether it enslaves or liberates mankind, whether it will save us from the apocalypse or simply bring the apocalypse closer.[43]" What these people are doing in this work, whether they be at IBM or at Škoda, they are doing to ensure their livelihood. Because they cannot affect the outcomes, their work has no real meaning. They are warm bodies performing functions, functions which could easily be accomplished with another set of hands.

The IBM corporation is just a single entity out of many. Many corporations such as these may be profit oriented and efficient, but remain ultimately dehumanizing at their core. According to Havel, in the Western Democratic system, despite its claims of liberalism and support for the supposed free market, there are no allowances which can prevent these automatizations from occurring.

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[41] Škoda Works was the largest industrial enterprise in Czechoslovakia during the time of this writing. The current strain is called Škoda Holding, a manufacturer of transport vehicles.

[42] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 14.

[43] Ibid.

Although it is true that an individual working in the factory of IBM can quit his job and possibly find employment elsewhere, for some it may not be as easy. They may be the sole supporters of large families, or the resident of a small town with little opportunity. He or she, in working to "secure the blessings of liberty to self and posterity,[44]" will have to work in a position that is essentially dehumanizing. Havel argues that there is something to say about a culture that perpetuates these decisions - he also points out, that in a nation that has more opportunity to promote the true "aims of life," how much more so should people strive to avoid supporting organizations and bodies which seek to dehumanize.

He states, "There is no real evidence that Western democracy, that is, democracy of the traditional parliamentary type, can offer solutions that are any more profound.[45]" What Havel is saying is that just because the system operates differently, under the cohesive element of a different ideology, it doesn't in any way imply that it is better. "It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and the industrial-consumer society, for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it.[46]" Because people in the West are supposedly free, it is in a way more terrible that this degree of dehumanization still occurs. For it to happen, and Havel declares this to frequently be the case, individuals must be manipulated in ways that are "infinitely more subtle and

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[44] *Preamble to the United States Constitution*

[45] Havel, Vaclav. "The Power of the Powerless" from *Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 114.

[46] Ibid.

refined than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies.[47]" Essentially, in the comparison between the post-totalitarian regime and that of Western Liberal Democracy, the mirror has two faces.

Despite these striking notions, Havel was not the first man to see a pattern of collectivist similarities between the methodologies of the East and the West. In his analysis of contemporary technology society, something he calls "the age of technicity," the philosopher Martin Heidegger came to some interesting conclusions that support Havel's understanding. Heidegger blames these developments towards dehumanization on humanity's inability to grapple with new technology, or to build a relationship with technology where individuality remains prevalent in the face of new discoveries.[48]

In the *Question Concerning Technology,* Heidegger examines the "essence of technology" like a psychiatrist examines the human brain, and his rumination on it is bleak at best. "Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it.[49]" Humanity, in the face of modern technology, has become caged by it. Technology, what was meant to be a tool, an instrument, has become the master of its inventor. Modern technology was created to be a means to end, not the end itself. He continues, "That is why the instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man

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[47] Ibid, 115.

[48] Heidegger, Martin. "Only a God Can Save Us": The Spiegel Interview (1966) Found on http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html. Accessed on 22 January 2013.

[49] Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc: 1977, 4. Found on http://ssbothwell.com/documents/ebooksclub.org__The_Question_Concerning_Technology_and_Other_Essays.pdf. Accessed on 22 January 2013.

into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means.[50]" Otherwise, humanity gives itself over to the "globally hegemonic apparatus.[51]"

What Havel seeks to demonstrate is that the worship of the machinery turns man into machinery, into automatons willing to serve to ends of those above them. "Technology-that child of modern science, which in turn is a child of modern metaphysics-is out of humanity's control, has ceased to serve us, has enslaved us and compelled us to participate in the preparation of our own destruction." The post-totalitarian system and the capitalist consumer society are merely symptoms of a much larger sense of disillusionment. The human failure that these two "symptoms" mirror are mere variants of the general failure of modern humanity.

So what is the cure for this general failure of modern humanity? Havel suggests a return to recognizing the sacredness of individual humanity. This solution has two parts, the first: "It's important that human life not be reduced to stereotypes of production and consumption, but that it be open to all possibilities.[52]" Foremost, man is not a machine with two base functions. Instead, he has goals, ideas, and most importantly, a will. Secondly, "It's important that people not be a herd, manipulated and standardized by the choice of consumer goods and consumer television culture, whether this culture is offered to him by three giant competing capitalist networks or a single giant noncompetitive

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 15.

socialist network.[53]" Essentially, it makes no difference whether a nation is communist or capitalist if the results are the same. When man has been reduced to a mere component in the grand bureaucratic machine, something is wrong with the system.

Modernization has forced humankind to grapple with its relationship with technology, and it has reacted badly. In the name of progress, Havel explains, man has surrendered his humanity to become a part of the machinery he invented. "Man has constructed a vision of a purely scientifically calculable and technologically achievable 'universal welfare' demanding no more than that experimental institutes invent it while industrial and bureaucratic factories turn it into reality.[54]" It had set out to protect itself from destruction, to perpetuate its own existence, and it achieved this - but at what expense? Each man, to help propagate the automatism, must essentially give up his or her own individual will, ideas, and sense of morality to serve the machine.

This isn't to say that every attempt to join people in the name of a common goal is inherently evil, Havel would disagree with such a notion. It's not the "community" or "organization" by themselves which create the problems that have been mentioned. "Every society, of course, requires some degree of organization. Yet if that organization is to serve people and not the other way around, then people will have to be liberated and space created so that they may

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Havel, Vaclav. "Politics and Conscience" in *Living in Truth.* London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 142.

organize themselves in meaningful ways.[55]" The "better" social system Havel stands behind, is one which creates this space, and organizes a community of men who matter individually, who are able to do meaningful work within a community - an idea which will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

[55] Ibid, 89.

Chapter 3: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. - Dehumanization in the Age of Technological Supremacy

In short, the world according to Vonnegut appears absurd, and life within it generally seems ultimately meaningless. ~ Peter J. Reed, from *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*

I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men.

~ Alexis de Tocqueville, from *Democracy in America*

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, a bright, unusual man from Indiana addresses the issue of dehumanization in the modern age from the other side of the issue. Instead of analyzing the value of life from within a bureaucratic system bent on the mass control of its populace, Kurt Vonnegut draws attention to a society which encourages the devaluation of the majority of its members for purposes of profit and efficiency of production. His works, widely proclaimed as "Science Fiction" yet falling much closer to satire, deal with the injustices permitted, and often encouraged, within the twentieth century American system. Like Václav Havel, the main problem he identifies is the propagation of a society where the "human" element has been taken out of the formula, and replaced by something inauthentic and predominately automated.

Vonnegut remains fairly consistent throughout his work, bringing to light the hypocrisy of any government who claims to be "better than the rest" while it secretly oppresses its people. Yet, the strongest expression of this sentiment is in

three works: the short story *Harrison Bergeron*, his first novel *Player Piano*, and one of the last works he ever wrote titled *A Man Without a Country.*

[1] The Saga of Havel's Greengrocer Retold in *Harrison Bergeron*

Vonnegut's most popular short story, *Harrison Bergeron* gives us the sour taste of what the world would be like if all differences were eradicated. "The year was 2081," He begins, "and everybody was finally equal.[56]" This wasn't a basic "level of rights" equality, similar to freedoms extended by way of the United States Bill of Rights, everybody was literally equal. It was a system, a "utopia" created on the foundations of perfect equality.

Inherent to Vonnegut's style, this man-made "utopia", absurd to the core, is of a dystopian nature. Man has been reduced to the most basic of automations, existing to propagate the society in which he lives. He has no bearing on anything, his individual life matters not at all to the movement of the grand machine. How is this enforced? Through the additions of the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the United States Constitution and the "unceasing vigilance of the United States Handicapper General."

At first reading, the story hearkens to the reality of Eastern Europe in the 1960s, lampooning the oppression those people under the strong hand of the Kremlin had to endure. Yet, interestingly enough, Vonnegut brought the piece to more familiar waters, setting the scene in a futuristic America. However, the parallel between this "America-to-be" and twentieth century Communist Europe

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[56] Vonnegut, Kurt. "Harrison Bergeron" from *Welcome to the Monkey House:* 1968.

is too obvious to overlook, and the tale it spins is an easy comparison to the world lived in by Václav Havel's greengrocer in *The Power of the Powerless.* Where the greengrocer must live out his life in a predetermined fashion, the people who live in the United States in Vonnegut's narrative live similarly predetermined existences.

In the story, the window opens on this strange world to a husband and wife watching television together. The woman, Hazel, isn't exceptionally bright and can only think about things in "short bursts." Her husband, George, on the other hand, is incredibly intelligent and exceedingly strong. So, under the requirements of the Constitution of the future, he has been handicapped. He is forced to always wear heavy bags containing innumerable lead spheres on his person, locked to a metal chain around his neck to weigh him down. To curb his mental faculties, he is required to wear a handicap radio in his ear. This isn't a standard radio, it's important to remark, but something created especially for someone of his intellect. Every few seconds, a loud noise plays through the radio, emitting sound directly into his ear. Sometimes its a buzzer, sometimes a train - it alternates - the purpose effected is that any thought which could be forming in his mind, is instantly driven out by the random distraction of the sound. This way, he is unable to concentrate on any one thing for very long at all, ensuring that his brain capacity remains exactly like everyone else's.

Like George, everyone is handicapped according to their talents. The TV program which Hazel and George are watching at the beginning of this narrative - doubtless the same program playing on every television set across the country -

is a dance performance. Ballerinas, typically distinguished by exceptional beauty and gracefulness, are handicapped with bags of sand and birdshot hanging from their person, and hideous masks on their faces. This causes them to dance no better than anyone else would be able to dance, but because this is their occupation, they do it anyway, and the whole country watches them.

In *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel's greengrocer lives in the true embodiment of Vonnegut's dystopia. He has no real meaning apart from the institution that governs him. The job he does is not exceptional - not because he isn't innovative or capable - but because the system he is subjected to forces things to be this way. As it has been examined, in the event of deflection, if the greengrocer wanted to profess his true capacities, and begin thinking for himself, he would be replaced. It would be a quiet thing, only those in his immediate circle would realize that he had gone. Inevitably someone would come along to replace him, performing the same work that he had been performing long before his dissidence. If he wishes to continue in his station, and preserve the livelihood he enjoys, he must submit the will of the governing body, the great machine. The same could be said of many industrial workers in Vonnegut's America of the 1960s, any man could be trained to the do the work, and anyone unable (or unwilling) to complete the tasks required of him, could be easily replaced.

To return to the narrative, there is a moment where Hazel recognizes that her husband is distressed by his handicaps. Although she doesn't possess the mental acumen to really help her husband, she does suggest that maybe he break the law and secretly remove some of the lead weights from the heavy bags

around his neck. After weighing one of the bags in his hands, considering the notion of at least temporary relief, he responds, "I don't mind it. I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me.[57]" At this moment in the story the reader knows fully that he cannot mean this, truly. There's no way that someone in possession of their full faculties could ever become completely accustomed to such a physical handicap without the support of a belief system - an all encompassing "ideology," as it were. George's belief system is that the Handicapper General is right in forcing him to endure these miseries. He is conditioned to believe that what he undergoes is for the benefit of all humanity, and his own personal difficulties don't really matter. He embraces the notion that life would be "worse for everyone" if he does not submit the will of the governing authorities, and thus obeys them, even though there is no one else present to enforce these rules externally.

The pervasive ideology of *Harrison Bergeron* is equality, and for a system based on this ideology to take effect, the people have to buy into it. This is accomplished initially through coercive measures until eventually people are conditioned to observe certain standards of behavior. There comes a time when people no longer need a coercive arm to dictate their actions. It may happen over a length of years, or it may happen all at once, but once they accept an ideology, and begin to believe in it, they will naturally start acting the way the tenets of the ideology encourage them to - which makes it more effective than any coercive body. George Bergeron, by refusing to remove some of the strength of the

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[57] Ibid.

handicap, he is upholding the system. It also helps to note that the penalty for breaking this law would be "Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine" for every lead weight he removed.

In a very strong way, George is mirroring the actions of the greengrocer, believing the lie for the sake of his livelihood. The greengrocer supported the ideology by placing a placard in the window of his shop, sporting the slogan "Workers of the World Unite," a sign similar to many throughout his country. George supports Vonnegut's invented system within the narrative by submitting to the verdicts of the Handicapper General. "It's just a part of me." He says. Yet, in truth, he is a part of it - the it being the encompassing authority of the system. "If I tried to get away with it," he continues, "then other people'd get away with it and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't want that would you?[58]" Here he is speaking to Hazel, who agrees with him even though she doesn't quite comprehend what her husband is talking about.

Not long after this, their conversation is interrupted by an announcement from the television. One of the ballerinas has been given a release saying there has been a disturbance, and everyone should be on alert. This disturbance happens to be Hazel and George's son, Harrison Bergeron. Harrison, put in Havel's terms, is a dissident - someone doing the difficult deed of trying to live within the truth. Vonnegut mentions Harrison at the beginning of the story when the Handicapper General had come to Bergeron's home to take him away for

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[58] Ibid.

being especially unequal to everyone else. When the ballerina reads the announcement, she declares him to be "a genius and an athlete," and dangerous to everyone because he has removed his handicaps.

Thus the dance of dissidence begins. Harrison Bergeron sets out on a path of action which could easily satirize what Havel's greengrocer could have become if he had chosen to act against the conventions of his society. Like the renegade greengrocer, Harrison Bergeron has decided to ignore the tenets of the ruling ideology, and boldly declare the existence of the lie by removing the handicaps which hold equality as the highest ideal.

Not long after the announcement has been made, Harrison Bergeron bursts onto the stage where the ballerinas were performing. Since the station is inside the main government building, Harrison has officially stormed the most highly secured premises. He then proclaims to the waiting camera, broadcasting his face to the thousands of spectators throughout the country, "I am the Emperor," and removes the remainder of his handicaps before the national eye. The Emperor is naked.

As would be expected by the tone of this tale, Harrison's time as self-proclaimed "Emperor" is short lived - just like the success of the greengrocer in preserving his livelihood and his sense of individuality would be short lived in *The Power of the Powerless*. The coercive apparatus exemplified by both the Handicapper General and the bureaucratic arm of the United Soviet Socialist Republic are sufficient to quell any outward steps from the defined boundaries soon after they arise.

Vonnegut allows Harrison a single shining moment. Harrison grabs one of the nearby ballerinas, the one who is endowed with the heaviest handicaps of her peers, and relieves her of them. She is undoubtedly the most graceful and most beautiful of all, and he makes her his queen. Together they leap into the air, free from their weights they seem to float above the crowds until their heads touch the ceiling. They stay there for an unnaturally long time, before they are both shot down by the strong hand of Lead Handicapper General Diana Moon Glampers. So it goes.

Harrison, the dissident greengrocer of *Harrison Bergeron*, has forgotten to adhere to the mores of the existing rules of his time. One man alone, regardless of strength or ability was absolutely powerless to effect any change against the pressures of the collective consciousness. It would require an element much stronger than that. For a dissident movement to have any real effect on the people of a society such as these mentioned, it must first dissolve the ideology that has bound it together. Without the dissolution of the belief system that propagates the lie, the lie will rule out over the truth.

Harrison Bergeron is not unique in theme to the Vonnegut corpus, it is neither the most outlandish nor the most dark, but its message is clear. Perfect equality, as well as perfect automatization, are the enemies of human dignity. He explores the second of these themes in his first novel *Player Piano,* delving further into a discussion of the consequences of devaluing the "human element" in society.

[2] *Player Piano* and the Devaluation of Human Labor

In the time of the writing of *Player Piano*, the world had been swept up by the new technologies which had emerged as a result of Second World War. The American citizenry was becoming inundated with new machines both at home and at work - machines which could do laundry, wash dishes, perform advanced calculations, and much more. With all this new technology, people began to have a real fear that machines would eventually replace human beings in the workplace. In 2013, this fear has yet to be fully alleviated.[59]

Even in the 1950s this fear was not a new development, but more of a resurgence from an earlier, popular event. The Luddites, led by the legendary Ned Ludd, were textile workers who lived in England in the early nineteenth century. They staged a massive rebellion during which they sabotaged machines they assumed would make their jobs obsolete. "In 1813 the British government executed by hanging seventeen men for 'machine breaking' as it was called, a capital crime.[60]" Although the measures they took were technically illegal, the "Luddites" turned out to be correct in their assumptions. In *Player Piano,* Vonnegut seems to channel the spirit of Ned Ludd, but instead of cursing the machines themselves, he is attacking the society which would promote the mass distribution and use of machines which would threaten human dignity in the work place.

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[59] Szawarski, Z. "Dignity and Technology." The Journal of medicine and philosophy, 1989, Vol. 14(3), pp.243-9; Decarlo, C. R. *Technology and Value* Systems. Educational Technology, 2010, Vol.50(5), p.55-57.

[60] Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without a Country.* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005: 56.

Peter Reed, author of a commentary of Vonnegut's work, says of *Player Piano*, "The central conflict in the novel is between the machine and the human, between those forces which have brought about and espouse automation and those which affirm the dignity of man, the warmth and fallibility of his animal being.[61]" Essentially, Vonnegut is arguing that humanity, despite being less efficient than a machine, has infinitely more value, and Václav Havel would agree, the protection of this sacredness of human value is vastly more significant than efficiency in production.

Kurt Vonnegut became a publicist for General Electric in Schenectady, New York in his late twenties. His older brother Bernard, a scientist at G.E., had urged him to take the position - and the young writer eagerly acquiesced. Vonnegut enjoyed his time with the company, and it eventually became the inspiration for a number of his short stories and novels, the most famous of which being his first novel *Player Piano*. According to an interview with Robert Scholes from *Playboy* Magazine in 1973, Vonnegut expressed that his inspiration for the novel came from his fascination with the sweeping movements of the factory's heavy machinery, and the tiny mechanized boxes and punch cards on which the whole system was based.

He says in the interview, "*Player Piano* was my response to the implications of having everything run by little boxes. The idea of doing that, you know, made sense, perfect sense.[62]" He acknowledges that there was a harmony

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[61] Reed, Peter J. *Writers for the Seventies: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr*. New York: Warner Books, 1972: 29.

[62] Robert Schole's Interview with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.. *Playboy Magazine.* July, 1973

to this, and understood that it made jobs easier. Yet, he continues, "To have a little clicking box make all the decisions wasn't a vicious thing to do. But it was too bad for the human beings who got their dignity from their jobs.[63]" The problem wasn't that things were being run more efficiently, it was that the worker's public worth, and even more important the worker's self-worth, was being diminished by the existence of these machines. In this factory environment, it was easy to see the dehumanizing effect these mechanical beings had on human workers, and Vonnegut decided to deal with the notion suggested by one of the prevailing fears of the time.

In *Player Piano*, man has been replaced by machines in the workplace. Only the elite in society, the engineers, the scientists, and the mathematicians keep their jobs. The philosophy is, if a machine can do it, then having a man do it is an unnecessary expenditure. "During the war," the narrator explains, " the managers and engineers had found that the bulk of secretarial work could be done - as could most lower echelon jobs - more quickly and efficiently and cheaply than by machines.[64]" There still was the odd secretary or two, just like there was the occasional bartender, but for the most part, nobody worked. The machines had eliminated all the jobs.

In the foreword, Vonnegut sets the tone for the story in an interesting manner. First, he declares, "This book is not a book about what is, but a book about what could be. The characters are modeled after persons as yet unborn,

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Vonnegut, Kurt. *Player Piano.* New York: Delacorte Press, 1952: 2.

or, perhaps, at this writing, infants.[65]" Even before he begins he's admitting what the central theme of the work will be: the bleak possibilities of the American future. He continues, "At this point in history, 1952 A.D., our lives and freedom depend largely upon the skill and imagination and courage of our managers and engineers, and I hope that God will help them to help us all stay alive and free.[66]"

Vonnegut drafted these words in the middle of the Cold War, in the midst of a world where the United States had set it self up as the beacon of freedom, the ideal nation in comparison the preeminent communist empire in the world, the Soviet Union. Yet, here Vonnegut, in the *foreword* to his first novel is warning the United States, as Havel had warned the whole of the West[67], of what it is well on its way to becoming - a elite-ruled nation which attaches no real meaning to the lives of those on the lower echelons. Only once Vonnegut makes this prophecy does he progress into the body of the novel.

The narrative is set in Ilium, New York, a fictional town which Vonnegut returns to in several of his novels. The town is split in half by the Iroquois River. On one side is the factory, and the homes of all the "important" people of the city - the people who have jobs, are independently wealthy, or are married to those who have jobs. The other side of the river is called Homestead, and the people who live there are mainly those who have been pushed out by the machines. The

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[65] ibid, foreword.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Havel, Vaclav. "Politics and Conscience" in *Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 145.

residents of Homestead, who haven't been assigned to one of only two options in the city, mostly spend their days in idle boredom.

The protagonist of this fiction is a man named Paul Proteus, and although it could be argued that his character has less personality than an average pylon, he does serve to drive the plot forward. He is the manager, and head engineer, of Ilium Works. It is one of the most sought after positions in the whole region, and thus he is one of the wealthiest men in the area. He gained this enviable vocation mainly through the efforts of his father, who was one of the main figures behind changing the society into this veritable technocracy.

The impetus for this major alteration was a great war. The implication was that this fictional war would be the equivalent of World War III, because not only the men had gone to fight, but the women as well. "During the war, in hundreds of Iliums over America, managers and engineers learned to get along without their men and women, who went to fight.[68]" Paul Proteus's father had been one of these manager/engineer combinations who founded Ilium Works and became its first general manager. It is no great surprise to the elite of Ilium then when Paul's standardized assessments exceeded standards, allowing him to follow in his father's footsteps, and take up the position as head of Ilium works.

In Ilium, like in cities throughout the country, people live and die by these machines. No decision is made without consulting their wisdom, no man promoted or demoted without their assurance. Each individual once he or he turns eighteen is subjected to a rigorous standardized assessment test, the "The

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[68] Ibid, 1.

National General Classification Tests," administered by the machines, which ultimately determine the individual's placement in society. Those who score high on the tests get the chance to attend college, after which they have relatively few options, and those who score low have little to no options. To be precise, the individuals who score badly have two options, either they can join the army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, a motley grouping of individuals who refer to themselves as the "Reeks and Wrecks."

Despite these paltry options, Vonnegut's United States of the future is not a poor country. The people who have lost their jobs to the machines live in relative comfort, a "second childhood,[69]" as it is known by those on the upper-class side of the river. The government provides them with a house, television, washing machine, etc. - ensuring that even the "home" aspect of their lives is automated. As Paul himself would later realize, "machines, organization and the pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness.[70]" To put it simply, the automatic lifestyle to which they are subjected has made them bored, unfulfilled, and machinelike.

Early in the novel, Paul's secretary, Katherine, is reviewing a speech he is to give that evening. She turns to him and compliments him on his words, on their supposed newness - he, modest and uncertain, deflects her praise. Still, she insists, "It seemed very fresh to me - I mean that part where you say how the First Industrial Revolution devalued muscle work, then the second one devalued

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[69] ibid, 10.

[70] Ibid, 267.

routine mental work.[71]" The Luddites, living in the early nineteenth century, had protested the rise of steam-powered machines during the First industrial Revolution. They knew that their jobs, based on the physical labor each man could provide, were at risk. If they did not break the machines, the machines would steal their livelihood. They were facing the devaluing of their ability to labor physically, and to earn fair wages for that labor. They sabotaged machines in effort to preserve these abilities, and were rewarded with the noose. The technological society progressed without them.

The Second Industrial Revolution, known widely as the Technological Revolution, arose in the 1860s with new capacities for the production of steel[72] and the addition of the production line. The movement swept across Europe and the United States, transforming the workplace, and affecting everything it touched. It introduced a range of new technologies including the telegraph, radio, electricity, railroads, chemicals, and much more. It raised the standard of living for millions of people, while at the same time eliminating hundreds of thousands of jobs - a truth dismissed in the name of "progress." In greater volume than ever, men were being replaced by machines.[73] The difference this time was that

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[71] Ibid, 12-13

[72] The Bessemer Process, the making of steel by blasting compressed air through molten iron to burn out excess carbon and impurities, was the first inexpensive industrial process for the mass-production of steel from molten pig iron. http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Bessemer_process.html

[73] Landes, David S. *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

instead of only replacing man's physical labor, machines had begun to step in for mental labor as well.

To return to Ilium, Katherine and Paul continue their discussion of the history of western Industrial Revolutions. Katherine questions Paul about the possibility of a Third Industrial Revolution, and what that would look like. He responds, "I guess the third one's been going on for some time, if you mean thinking machines. That would be the third revolution, I guess - machines that devaluate human thinking. Some of the big computers like EPICAC do that all right, in specialized fields.[74]" In *Player Piano,* man's physical and mental labor have already been deemed "unessential" at this point, and the leaders of this new technological age are attempting to progress things so that each man no longer has to think for himself. This method is a gradual conditioning, stealing dignity from the workers, devaluing their capacities a little bit at a time.

One of the eponymous dictators of the twentieth century, a German, stated once, "How fortunate it is for leaders that men do not think." History has shown that once the people of a nation have stopped questioning their leaders, and have forgotten the importance of thinking for themselves, they open themselves up for external control. Part of the conditioning is the rationalization that this sort of mass manipulation is morally justified. Paul exemplifies such a line of reasoning with this inner dialogue: "Objectively, Paul tried to tell himself, things really were better than ever. For once, after the great bloodbath of the war, the world really was cleared of unnatural terrors - mass starvation, mass

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[74] Vonnegut, Kurt. *Player Piano*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1952: 13.

imprisonment, mass torture, mass murder.[75]" By removing the impact of the "human" element at a major level, the government of *Player Piano* had sufficiently removed war from the scene. They only kept an army "just in case," but none of the soldiers had ever trained with anything other than wooden guns.

He continues, "Objectively, know-how and world law were getting their long-awaited chance to turn earth into an altogether pleasant and convenient place in which to sweat out Judgement Day." Man's knowledge and invention of machinery had created a world that was "pleasant," or better to say, one that was automated. There weren't the "hindrances" of competition or achievement, everything was perfectly apportioned out and utterly devoid of any real meaning. Paul himself, the man with the highest income of Ilium, spent his time in the office reading adventure novels and only occasionally checking the switchboard on the wall to make sure there were no threats to the factory. Any semblance of actual work had been removed from the establishment, and man was condemned to survive in a state of perpetual automation.

However, in the midst of this all-encompassing machinery, in the novel there is a sort of underground which wishes to overthrow the mechanical society, and restore man to his rightful position in the workplace. The movement, called the Ghost Shirt Society, is led by Reverend James J. Lasher, a resident of Homestead. He speaks out in support of the value of human dignity, explaining the behavior of those who have been displaced He states, "For generations they've been built up to worship competition and the market, productivity and

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[75] Ibid, 6.

economic usefulness, and the envy of their fellow men - and boom! it's all yanked out from under them.[76]" These individuals have gone from useful to useless, and they are no longer needed in society.

A visiting diplomat to Ilium, the Shah of Bratpuhr, is one of the few voices of wisdom that can be heard throughout this novel. His observations utterly baffle the Americans who interact with him, as they cannot understand how a man can be so simpleminded. On one of the tours, the Shah witnesses the actions of the Reeks and Wrecks, and asks, through his translator, who owns all these slaves. The attendant laughs, and declares that they are not slaves, explaining that they are merely citizens employed by the government. He elaborates, "They have the same rights as other citizens - free speech, freedom of worship, the right to vote. Before the war, they worked in the Ilium Works, controlling machines, but now machines control themselves much better.[77]" Technically, no, they aren't slaves, but neither are they free. In this system these individuals are not special, nor is there any meaning to their work. If a member of the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps were to die, another man would be there to replace him. The same applies to the army. And, contrary to what the elites of Ilium might think, people in Paul's position, the same applies to them.

Although an extreme example, *Player Piano* is a satire depicting Václav Havel's assertion in *Disturbing the Peace:* "It is well known that enormous private multinational corporations are curiously like socialist states.[78]" A reality where

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[76] Ibid, 78.

[77] Ibid, 18.

[78] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 14.

organizations like the Ghost Shirt Society, and individuals like the greengrocer of *The Power of the Powerless* are unable to effect any real change in the system. The Shah of Bratpuhr, offering the reader a form of comic relief in the midst of this dystopian universe, sees from the very beginning the fallacy of Ilium, an orchestrated lawlessness which manifests itself in spiritual poverty, emotional deadness, and social hypocrisy of this future America.[79]

This isn't so bold as to say that the West is inherently corrupt - not at all. What Vonnegut and Havel have expressed is the importance that human life not be reduced to stereotypes of production and consumption, but that it be open to all possibilities. Man is not a machine, and should not be treated as one. Each individual possesses goals, ideas, and a will which should not be manipulated by those with power over him. These men are warning the West to remember itself, and to protect the right of every man to a sense of dignity in his life and his work.

[3] *A Man Without a Country*

More than fifty years after *Player Piano* was first put into circulation, Kurt Vonnegut would write a final work that would become the closest thing to a memoir he would publish during his lifetime. *A Man Without a Country*, subtitled: *A Memoir of Life in George W. Bush's America,* is a compilation of essays written about Kurt Vonnegut's own life and his views on politics, socioeconomics, and the state of humanity in the twenty-first century world. In this short book he praises Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* for its masterful

[79] Reed, Peter J. Writers for the Seventies: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. New York: Warner Books, 1972: 45.

descriptions of the "strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in our form of government,[80]" derides the inauthenticities of organized religion, and candidly discusses how much of a "bummer it is to be a human being.[81]"

Curiously enough he also praises socialism - not the strain developed under Soviet rule - but a form which rose during the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States. "Most Americans don't know what the socialists did during the first half of the past century with art, with eloquence, with organizing skills, to elevate the self-respect, the dignity and political acumen of American wage earners, of our working class.[82]" He admires these individuals for their audacity to put the importance of human dignity above the need to better competitors and control the means of production.

At the same time he admits the stigma surrounding the term. "'Socialism' is no more an evil word than 'Christianity.' Socialism no more prescribed Joseph Stalin and his secret police and shuttered churches than Christianity prescribed the Spanish Inquisition.[83]" He draws attention to the Soviet system, pointing out the obvious flaws within that regime - while at the same time addressing similar issues existing in his America. "Christianity and socialism a like, in fact, prescribe a society dedicated to the proposition that all men, women, and children are created equal and shall not starve.[84]" Vonnegut declares himself to be "a man

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[80] Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without a Country*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005: 8.

[81] Ibid, 9.

[82] Ibid, 10.

[83] Ibid, 11.

[84] Ibid.

without a country," because the American nation had not kept itself in check - and had continue to put the desires of its wealthiest and most powerful members above the needs of the many.

He argues that Industries should not be allowed to whatever they want to do and call it "free enterprise." They should not be allowed to "Bribe, wreck the environment a little, fix prices, screw dumb customers, put a stop to competition, and raid the Treasury when they go broke.[85]" They should not be permitted to raise profit margins at the price of the devaluing of their employees. The free market is not an automatic system of justice, and some accountability should be introduced into the formula so that the common right to human dignity is preserved first. Like Havel observed in *Disturbing the Peace*, many of these Western corporations have lost touch with their human dimension. The men and women who work in these warehouses are cogs in the machinery, separated from the purposes of the technology they are producing and the impact this product will be on the world. And, as a result, their work really has no meaning.

Vonnegut returns to the example of the Luddites in his discussion of human dignity. He says, "Ned Ludd was a textile worker in England at around the start of the nineteenth century who busted up a lot of new contraptions.[86]" Ned Ludd would become a legend, leading a mass movement against the advance of machinery upon the territory of man's workplace, Yet, he never intended to inspire a movement. In truth, he was trying to make sure that these mechanical

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[85] Ibid, 85.

[86] Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without a Country*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005: 55-56.

looms were not going to put him out of work, He wanted to destroy the machines that were trying to make it impossible for him with his particular skills to feed, clothe and shelter his family.[87]

In a democratic society, based on a written Constitution, Vonnegut explains that there is no reason for men like Ned Ludd to fear their livelihood is at stake by the introduction of new technologies. The American nation exists on the notion that all men and women everywhere have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of property - or, better expressed, the right to dignity in all aspects of their existence. They should be able to pursue meaningful work without fear, or without being forced to take up an occupation which reduces them to unthinking, mechanical elements in a larger apparatus.

[87] ibid.

Chapter 4: Prescriptions for Living in Truth

You know, the truth can be powerful stuff. You're not expecting it.

- Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*

It's hard to imagine the kind of system I've tried to describe here coming about unless man, as I've said, "comes to his senses."

- Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*[88]

Living in truth as Havel and Vonnegut prescribe should not be just a notion depicting the ideal way of living, but an accessible reality. Individuals everywhere, regardless of race, gender, country of origin, or tax bracket should have the right to enjoy the proper aims of life and to pursue meaningful work. Although its integration will require universal cooperation, the movement must begin from the top down, when those in authority begin to rebuild the foundations of human dignity for all men, and restore the relationship between humanity and the structures which govern it. The system must be redesigned "so that people can see into how the enterprise they work for works, have a say in that, and assume responsibility for it.[89]" Only when a worker can affect the result of the product that he has created does his work begin to have value for him. It is the responsibility of authorities to initially provide this opportunity.

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[88] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 17.

[89] Ibid, 15.

At the end of *Player Piano*, Dr. Paul Proteus gives a speech delineating the new requirements for the technocrats of Ilium. At this stage in the narrative he has joined the Ghost Shirt Society and is attempting to overthrow the agents of dehumanization in that region: the machines and those who have supported their importance at the expense of human significance. He begins: "You, the engineers and managers and bureaucrats, almost alone among men of higher intelligence, have continued to believe that the condition of man improves in direct ratio to the energy and devices for using energy put at his disposal.[90]" He addresses the lie, the lie that declares the prevalence of machinery has improved life for all men, when it has indeed worsened it by making men machinelike.

He continues, "Man has survived Armageddon in order to enter the Eden of eternal peace, only to discover that everything he had looked forward to enjoying there, pride, dignity, self-respect, work worth doing, has been condemned as unfit for human consumption.[91]" The Armageddon referred to is the fictional war, the time of great discomfort and grief, where the strivings of men, culminating in a bloodbath of remarkable proportions, convinced the engineers and bureaucrats that the way of living ought to be changed dramatically. In the midst of this proposed "utopia" of technological supremacy, man has lost his sense of significance, and although his life is certainly more pleasant, insomuch as it is devoid of all competition and struggle, it is no longer worth living.

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[90] Vonnegut, Kurt. *Player Piano*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1952: 260.

[91] Ibid.

"Without regard for the wishes of men, any machines or techniques or forms of organization that can economically replace men do replace men.[92]" As Havel has explained, in a society where the protection of human value is not considered the highest aim, men are useful only in relation to what they can produce. They are not treated as beings with souls, responsible for what they are creating, but instead seen as akin to unthinking animals, little better than robots, who produce that which they have been instructed. They do not matter in and of themselves, and therefore their work does not matter, it is only a means to an end. Vonnegut, through Dr. Proteus, continues, "Replacement is not necessarily bad, but to do it without regard for human the wishes of men is lawlessness.[93]" It is, at it's core, dehumanizing.

The truth of this matter is something which manifests itself much differently. "Men, by their nature, seemingly, cannot be happy unless engaged in enterprises that make them feel useful.[94]" Reducing individuals to rote automatism, where their minds and passions are no longer engaged through the doing of true, meaningful work, where they don't possess a responsibility for the fruit of their labors, where they could easily be replaced by someone unequal to them in skill or talent, is lawlessness. Yet, to stop this from occurring, a relationship that must be established from both sides of the issue. Enterprises, bureaucracies, corporations, or governments must first provide the opportunity,

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[92] Ibid, 261.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid, 262.

but the people themselves must also strive to uphold it. Both leaders and the led must work to create and maintain this maxim.

Because all are responsible for all, individuals equally have a responsibility in the preservation of human dignity. "[Man] must rebel against his role as a helpless cog in the gigantic and enormous machinery hurtling God knows where.[95]" The first step is awareness. Man must "come to his senses." Living in truth requires that the individual stare boldly at the lie and declare it to be what it is, a lie. He or she must realize that the Emperor is naked, and that to accept any other reality is to surrender that which is most important. "He must discover within himself a deeper sense of responsibility towards the world, which means a responsibility towards something higher than himself.[96]" Living in truth recognizes the depth of human significance, acknowledging its role in the interconnected workings of the world, and acting in such a way that these tenets are preserved. Man at the personal level must reject any system that would attempt to reduce him to mere machinery, and fight for that which will preserve the sanctity of his worth as a useful member of society. One man can't singlehandedly save the world, but he can make positive steps in that direction by coming to these fundamental understandings himself.

Havel would write in a letter to his wife Olga, "One of the first movements away from automatism, is the recognition of absurdity, which comes only to those

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[95] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 11.

[96] Ibid.

'whose very being thirsts after meaning' and who are pained to find it missing.[97]" The lie is the absurdity, something to those outside the system would seem ridiculous, but to those within is the sole truth. When an individual begins to realize that the lie is present, and that the aims of life do not derive from the governing apparatus, but from the governed themselves, he has taken the first step towards the true way. Yet, this is only the beginning.

After this individual has taken this first important step, his job becomes much more difficult, but all the more necessary. He has assumed the role of "dissident," and must act quickly before he is thwarted. He must continue to resist, thoughtfully and attentively, with total dedication, "at every step and everywhere the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal and inhuman power - the power of ideologies, systems, apparat, bureaucracy, artificial languages and political slogans.[98]" He must not let himself fall victim to the hook which had held him fast before hand, because the strength of the lie gains power with belief.

Furthermore, Havel prescribes that this individual must stand against the "complex and wholly alienating pressure" of these pulls, whether they manifest themselves as "consumption, advertising, repression, technology, or cliché - all of which are the blood brothers of fanaticism and the wellspring of totalitarian thought.[99]" The lie shows up in various forms, bent on devaluing those who

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[97] Caleb Crain. "Havel's Specter: On Václav Havel." *The Nation*. March 21, 2012. On-line http://www.thenation.com/article/166949/havels-specter-vaclav-havel# Accessed March 1, 2013.

[98] Havel, Vaclav. "Politics and Conscience" in *Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 153.

[99] Ibid.

adhere to its toxin. "System, ideology and apparat have deprived humans - rulers as well as the ruled - of their conscience, of their common sense and natural speech and thereby, of their actual humanity.[100]" When ideology, whether it prevails in the factories of Schenectady, the storefront windows of Soviet-ruled Prague, or anywhere else, attempts to replace the true aims of life with its own specious understanding, it dehumanizes, reduces men to machinery.

What Havel and Vonnegut are prescribing is a movement away from the eschatology of the impersonal and the adoption of the "politics of man." Although neither have a definitive answer for how this may come about, both agree that it begins with the individual first recognizing the lie, and choosing to act in such a way that reduces its overall affect. Havel states, "I believe in the principle of self-management, which is probably the only way of achieving what all the theorists of socialism have dreamed about." Again, like Vonnegut in *A Man without a Country*, Havel references socialism in its original philosophical form. The dream that he refers to is the "genuine participation of workers in economic decision making, leading to a feeling of genuine responsibility for their collective work.[101]" It is of little importance whether this occurs in a socialist, capitalist, or any other economic system. If anything, both men would argue that the best economic system would be one encourages decentralization and the greatest amount of plurality of modes of ownership and economic decision-making.[102]

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[100] Ibid, 104.

[101] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 11.

[102] Ibid. 16.

In a society where "all are responsible for all," values like trust, openness, and solidarity will begin to replace deceit, greed, and manipulation. Structures won't be focused on the technical aspect of the execution of power as an end in itself, but at the "significance of that execution in structures held together more by a commonly shared feeling of the importance of certain communities than by commonly shared expansionist ambitions directed outward.[103]" The preservation of human dignity will be the highest aim.

In *Mother Night*, Kurt Vonnegut's narrative about an apolitical expatriate American playwright who becomes a Nazi propagandist, he says quite eloquently: "We must be careful about what we pretend to be." As history has boldly expressed, there are dire consequences when man refuses to live in truth, when it is necessary, for the sake of his sense of dignity for himself and those around him, that he do so.

To live in truth is to accept the notion of human responsibility, and most importantly, to understand that it's essential that human life "not be reduced to stereotypes of production and consumption, but that it be open to all possibilities.[104]" Instead of supporting the structures which dehumanize the mass of humanity, reducing it to a series of mechanical elements in a vast, amorphous, bureaucratic apparatus, which transform the beauty of existence into something coarse and irrelevant, it is necessary to maintain the validity of humanity, holding fast to the truth of man's inherent meaning and unquestionable value.

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[103] Havel, Vaclav. "The Power of the Powerless" from *Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 42.

[104] Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990: 15.

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